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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001064

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STATE FOR SCA FOR A/S BOUCHER AND PMOON
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/CDHA/DG
NSC FOR JWOOD
OSD FOR MSHIVERS
CENTCOM FOR CG CJTF-82 AND POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL...

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2018

TAGS: PREL PTER ECON IR PK AF

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER SPANTA ON PAKISTAN, IRAN, AND
PLANS FOR TRIP TO WASHINGTON

REF: KABUL 1027

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Foreign Minister Spanta told the Ambassador on April 22 that he would use his meetings in Islamabad the following day to underline Afghanistan's support for Pakistan's new government and explore opportunities for concrete projects (dealing especially with trade and economic cooperation) to strengthen cross-border ties. Spanta nevertheless expressed concern that the government must be seen as transitional and that Nawaz Sharif is likely to end up in power. Spanta said he is advocating close Afghan-Pak cooperation on counter-terrorism as well as reconciliation efforts. He expressed concern over Iranian meddling, including efforts to convoke Ambassador from surrounding countries to discuss U.S. long-term plans in Afghanistan. Spanta underlined his personal conviction that Iran is at least as dangerous as Pakistan, but defended his recent remarks downplaying evidence of Iranian support for the Taliban as reflecting the

Afghan government's need to manage its western neighbor and avoid a second front. Spanta reiterated his intention to visit Washington as soon as possible.

Pakistan: Support for Government; Worries about the Future

¶12. (C) Spanta told the Ambassador his trip to Islamabad was meant to underline Afghan support for and intention to cooperate with the new government. Spanta acknowledged Pakistan had protested over Defense Minister Wardak's recent visit to Kashmir (which Wardak insisted was private), but he did not expect that issue to have a negative impact on his meetings in Islamabad. He planned to meet with Musharraf, PM Gilani, ForMin Qureshi, Lower House Speaker Fahmida Mirza, and leaders from the ANP and PPP, and if possible Pakistani Muslim League Leader Nawaz Sharif (trip readout septel). Spanta would be looking for opportunities to identify concrete projects to further cross-border cooperation, particularly in the area of economic cooperation, trade, and transit arrangements. Afghanistan will be doing everything possible to help the new government succeed, as having a civilian government is critical. Spanta nevertheless expressed concern that the current arrangement can only be seen as transitional, given that the PPP did not put forth its strongest person. In Spanta's view, this had been a great mistake as it might lead to Sharif (who has strong connections to Islamic groups) ending up in power. Spanta said he would be able to discuss his concerns frankly with the ANP, but would need to be very diplomatic in conversations with the PPP.

¶13. (C) Spanta said that, while President Karzai might not take his advice, he is advocating close Afghan-Pakistan cooperation on counter-insurgency efforts and on reconciliation. He underlined the danger of any separate accommodation with al Qaeda, arguing that the consequence of separate action by Pakistan would be movement of the Taliban across the border to Afghanistan. This would be bad for Afghanistan, but also dangerous for Pakistan in that it would allow the terrorists and extremists to turn Afghanistan into a base against Pakistan. He said he wanted to deepen the dialogue on this an other issues and would be inviting Qureshi to Kabul for discussions within three months. He added that Kabul, Islamabad and Ankara are working on a date for the next meeting in the Istanbul-round of discussions at the presidential level.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador said the U.S. supports deepened Afghan-Pakistan dialogue at all levels. He agreed that the transitional arrangement in Pakistan is less than ideal and understood concerns about Sharif, but added that there are signs that the ISI is pressuring those in the tribal areas to distance themselves from the Arabs. The best solution would be a combined counter-terrorism operation against al Qaeda, the Pakistan Taliban, and the Afghan Taliban. Closure of refuges used by terrorists in Pakistan should be a priority.

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Some terrorists would come across the border, but here they can be defeated.

Iran: Its Meddling and its Dialogue with Afghan Neighbors

¶15. (C) Spanta commented on the new Iranian Ambassador's aggressive efforts to coordinate and lead the Iranian campaign to influence events in Afghanistan. He described Ambassador Fada Hossein Maleki as close to the National Front as well as to Karzai's Chief of Staff Daudzai (who served as Afghan Ambassador to Iran until 2007). Spanta claimed Maleki was meeting regularly with President Karzai, but was more concerned that he had organized meetings with his Russian, Chinese, Uzbek, Kazak, Tajik, Indian and Pakistani counterparts to discuss Afghanistan. According to reports Spanta had heard, Maleki had used the first meeting to

articulate his view of long-term U.S. plans in Afghanistan. Spanta understood the Indian Ambassador had agreed to host the next meeting of the group. He appealed to the Ambassador to consider convoking a larger group to include the current participants plus the U.S. and Afghanistan -- an expansion of the six-plus-two concept.

¶ 16. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. would have difficulties participating in the group with Iran and noted that there are established mechanisms for broad-based dialogue that includes Iran -- such as the JCMB co-chaired by the Afghan government and UNAMA. He told Spanta he would share Spanta's idea for a broad regionally based dialogue with Washington for consideration before the ForMin's proposed visit to Washington later in the Spring.

How to Manage Iran

¶ 17. (C) The Ambassador then raised Spanta's recent statements downplaying Iranian actions (including that there is no evidence Iran is assisting the Taliban). He told Spanta that this statement had caught Washington's attention as, in fact, we all know that Iran is providing support to the Taliban. The Ambassador underlined that the U.S. appreciates the problems Afghanistan has with Iran and the need for good relations; the challenge is finding a way to be a good neighbor without exonerating them.

¶ 18. (C) Spanta defended his statements, saying they reflected the position of the Afghan government and that he had been doing his duty. While there is indeed deep concern over Iranian influence, it is simply not possible for Afghanistan to open a second front with Iran, given the need to deal with Pakistan. Spanta observed that while he personally believes that Iran is more dangerous than Pakistan (I cannot accept the role of mullahs, especially the Iranian mullahs), he recognizes that he is obligated to work to reduce tensions with Iran. The Ambassador reiterated that being a good neighbor does not require ignoring or denying actions that are unacceptable.

Trip to Washington

¶ 19. (C) The ForMin reiterated his desire to travel to Washington as soon as possible to lay the groundwork for a possible visit by President Karzai and the Paris Conference. He also hoped to sign a joint statement affirming U.S. and Afghan commitment to the Strategic Partnership (text of agreed statement will be forwarded to SCA/A) while he was in Washington. He said he recognized the statement would be largely symbolic, but asserted that it would have positive resonance with the Afghan public. Spanta was working through the Afghan Embassy in Washington and aiming for a visit early in May. The Ambassador promised to relay the request.

WOOD